

WINCHESTER 06: Independent Register

01: Independent Register (1804)

The sixth journal issued in Winchester was the second in a series of short-lived Republican papers printed by a string of proprietors using the same press. The shortness of their runs reflects the dominance of the local Federalist weekly that each was intended to counteract. This weekly was conducted by the two journeymen who last directed the office of the first Republican paper for their absentee master, and closed about a year later.

In advance of the 1800 federal elections, Republican leaders throughout the country began an effort to establish partisan papers designed to counter the disproportionate influence of Federalist journals – then the decided majority of newspapers published in the country. In Virginia, this undertaking resulted in the founding of new papers in Winchester, Staunton, Petersburg, and Richmond, while extending patronage for existing ones in Fredericksburg and Norfolk. Winchester's contribution to this effort was the *Triumph of Liberty*, a weekly published by George Trisler (419) and John Hass (205). Trisler had been part of the town's first newspaper office from early 1789 to late 1791, working the press owned by Matthias Bartgis (024), which issued his *Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* and *Virginische Zeitung*. The young printer was driven from the trade in a split with Bartgis when that office was closed in late 1791; he returned to the trade in the summer of 1799 to publish the first Republican journal issued in Winchester. His alliance with Hass continued until the spring of 1803, when Hass retired from partisan journalism and returned to his former pursuits in the lower Shenandoah Valley.

Yet Trisler was also tiring of the editorial grind in Winchester, wanting to return to his retail dry-goods business in Frederick, Maryland; so he brought in a journeyman named Peter Isler (235) to conduct his four-year-old press for him. Isler was native of Pennsylvania who was reportedly trained in the Philadelphia office of William Fry (1777-1855), the tradesman who later introduced stereotype printing to America; once in Winchester, Isler finished the training of Trisler's young apprentice, Joseph Harmer (201), the son of Jacob Harmer, a well-respected veteran who served with Frederick County's Daniel Morgan in the Revolutionary War. Hence, after Hass's retirement, it appears that Isler and Harmer managed both the press and paper for Trisler, allowing him to be an absentee proprietor. This arrangement continued until the winter of 1803-04, about eight months in all, when Trisler finally ceased publication of his *Triumph of Liberty*, probably on January 2, 1804, when the weekly would have completed the first half of its fifth volume/year.

That ending seems well planned and timed. Trisler was reportedly averse to conducting the paper in another election cycle, and so was willing to leave his partisan journal in younger hands exhibiting a reliably Republican perspective. Accordingly, the two tradesmen who had managed his office during 1803 now acquired that operation as independent tradesmen; they then issued a new partisan weekly from that press as the firm of Isler & Harmer, just as the 1804 campaign season began.

The first issue of the *Independent Register* appeared on March 20, 1804, if the numbering of the paper's few surviving copies evinces an uninterrupted publication from its start. Such a continuance is more than likely, as the point of the transfer was to preserve and revive the lone agrarian voice in this mercantile setting. Isler & Harmer obviously expected to draw on Winchester's hinterlands for their sustenance, just as had Trisler. But they did not exert the same authority that Trisler & Hass had, being relatively unknown personalities in Frederick County; consequently, their *Independent Register* was a more problematic venture fiscally than had been the *Triumph of Liberty*. The weekly's short print runs can be discerned from the survival of six numbers, all from the nine weeks between September 25 and November 20, 1804; such scarcity is evidence that fewer issues of this paper were printed each week than were those of the *Winchester Gazette* of Federalist Richard Bowen (045), and so of the lack of funds and supplies they needed to print more.

Consequently, it is little surprising that there are no surviving issues of this weekly more recent than November 20, 1804. By that date, the federal elections had been held and the reelection of Jefferson attained, meaning that the purpose for this marginal publication had ceased to exist, and that the newspaper itself soon followed suit. Early in 1806, Isler tried to resurrect the *Independent Register* as its sole proprietor, indicating that the original weekly had perished in the interim; it is most likely that this partisan sheet closed at either the end of 1804, after a nine-month-long run, or in March 1805, when a one-year contract between Isler and Harmer would have expired. Indirect evidence reveals that Isler was operating a Winchester job-press in the spring of 1805, suggesting the finish came at year's end rather than later, with Harmer then removing to Baltimore to find work as a journeyman there.

After failing to revive interest in the *Register* in early 1806, Isler decided to move on as well. He sold his press to Joseph A. Langan (266), who was apparently his shop foreman, and left for the west, subsequently publishing Republican newspapers at Bardstown, Kentucky, and Natchez in the Mississippi Territory. Langan would issue yet another Republican paper from this twice-sold press in March 1806 – *The Philanthropist* – in conjunction with Matthias E. Bartgis (025), the eldest son of Winchester's first newspaper publisher.

Sources: LCCN No. 85-025368; Brigham II: 1164; Cartmell, *Shenandoah Pioneers, Woods, Delta Plantations*; Patridge, "Press of Mississippi" (1860); Rock, *New York City Artisans*; and Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*.